

THE FURNITURE OF A LODGE

The Masonic Ritual states that the interior of a Freemasons' Lodge is composed of Ornaments, Furniture and Jewels.

The Ornaments are the Mosaic Pavement, the Blazing Star and the Indented or Tessellated Border; the Furniture consists of the VSL, the Compasses and the Square; and the Jewels are the three movable (the Square, Level and Plumb-rule) and three immovable (the Tracing Board, Rough and Perfect Ashlars).

It is interesting that the Ritual refers only to three articles of furniture and that these particular articles (the VSL, Square and Compasses) are always exhibited in the Lodge.

Yet, if all the movable contents of a Lodge room were listed according to the generally accepted meaning of the term 'furniture', the list would include many articles not classified in the Ritual. For example, the altar, the letter "G", gavel, working tools, chairs, pedestals, Wands, cabinets and column and many other such items are undoubtedly articles of furniture - many of them would have been found in early operative and speculative Lodges, as mentioned below.

Nevertheless the Ritual refers to only three items as furniture: the VSL, the Square and the Compasses. There is no doubt, of course, about the importance of those three articles because they are used as vehicles of moral instruction. The Sacred Writings are derived from God to man in general; the Compasses belong to the Grand Master in particular, and the Square to the whole Craft.

Why were the others not included? What were the reason for omitting such items as the letter "G", the Working Tools and other movable contents? *There is no clear reason why.* But it is important to know that although the New South Wales and the majority of other Rituals currently used restrict the term furniture to the VSL, Square and Compasses, yet older Rituals name other articles as furniture. This applies particularly to instruction based on the writings of William Preston and Dr Oliver (some of which are still preserved, eg at Bath, England). Further, there were at one time, in some places, items of furniture particular to a Fellowcraft's or Master Masons' Lodge. But even in remote times, the term furniture, was restricted to but a small part of Lodge equipment.

Some writers accept the fact of a restricted application of the term furniture and overcome the problem in this way:

They divide all the paraphernalia or appointments or equipment to be found in a Lodge room into two categories:-

- 1) Furniture, restricted to the VSL, Square and Compasses, as delineated in the Ritual;

2) Furnishings, ie all those extra items necessary for the accommodation of the assembled Brethren and for the proper conduct of their ceremonies and the illustration of Masonry.

Long before the first Masonic Hall (of which we have an account) was erected solely for Masonic purposes in Marseilles in the year 1765, it was customary for Lodges to meet in ale houses or taverns. Some Lodges in the world still meet regularly in these places. The items of the Lodge, which are the furnishings etc; were moved to store rooms after each meeting which tended to eliminate the provision of unnecessary items.

Many inventories of 18th and 19th Century furnishings are available to us in Masonic literature. Some contain items not now seen usually in Masonic Lodges; eg pails, coffins and other funeral objects, Master's hat, clock with a dial divided into 24 hours, beehive, mallet, trowels, chest, tables, broached thurnels, firing glasses, etc.

In early 18th Century writings, replicas of King Solomon's pillars set up in Lodge rooms are described as "handsome pieces of furniture", but in others the only references in lists of furnishings of Lodges are to sets of three candlesticks. However, descriptions of furnishings are found in "The Grand Mystery of Freemasons Discovered" - 1724, and Wisdom, Strength & Beauty in "Masonry Dissected" - 1730. These add light to the development of the "lesser lights", the tracing boards and the importance of the three pillars as permanent items of "furniture" and establish the fact that "furniture" had taken on a definite form and meaning before the end of the 18th Century.

Generally speaking, the primarily operative Lodges seemed to have possessed little by way of furnishings, only the furniture and other essential items. This was particularly so in Scotland.

On the other hand, some Lodges were very amply and expensively furnished, possessing much more than most others. Some Lodges are very proud of their Temple, justifiably, on the dignified elegance of their Lodge rooms handed down to them by their Brethren of yester-years. Pictures of their furnishings appear in Masonic publications from time to time, while disused items find their way into Masonic museums.

But these days, particularly in New South Wales, a considerable measure of standardization of furnishings remains. Diversity in furnishings between individual Lodges exists because no Grand Lodge has laid down a list of items with which a Lodge shall be furnished. The furnishing is part of the discretion given to Lodges to regulate their own affairs, provided there are landmarks, laws and regulations of our Order and that all are present to meet the requirements of the Ritual.

This talk has explained that the Ritual restricts proper application of the term furniture to three articles and how other items are considered.

It is suggested that selected Brethren be invited to study the Ritual, the 5th section of the First Lecture and the First Tracing Board in particular and any other Masonic Literature

on the subject, so that each may, present a short paper outlining reasons for the Ritual restriction. It will add great interest to the work and aid in the cultivation of the human aspect, which is 'The noble object of Freemasonry', as stated in the Introductory Address to the Lecturers on the Ritual.

Bibliography:

Mackey: Encyclopedia of Freemasonry

Jones: Freemasons' Guide and Compendium A.Q.C. 1XXXIII, 351

1724 "The Grand Mystery of Freemasons Discovered"

1730 "Masonry Dissected"